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NEIGHBORHOOD PHARMACISTS TO OFFER FLU SHOTS WITH COUGH DROPS

Connelly hopes the new regulations he's working on will give public scientists a better understanding of how much of what's in cigarette smoke gets into smokers' bodies.

And DPH is launching a new public awareness campaign to warn people about the virus Hepatitis C, which causes liver damage and is be transmitted via blood and was originally most commonly found amongst IV drug users or people who had unprotected sex. But health officials say that because infected people often don't know they have it for years, they can unwittingly spread it to others. The virus, which affects about 100,000 Bay State residents, was identified in 1992 and was last year made a national priority by the federal government.

"Hepatitis C represents a hidden epidemic," said Dr. Bela Matyas. "Most people who have Hepatitis C don't know they are infected. The disease is silent in most people. By the time you develop symptoms, your liver is seriously damaged."

Added Public Health Commissioner Dr. Howard Koh: "This is a key public health issue for the new century. This is a relatively new disease for our society."

Of the 100,000 people with Hepatitis C in Massachusetts, about 20,000 will develop serious liver damage. About 1,000-4,000 will die from liver failure brought on by the virus, which can be treated in some people. There is no vaccine. The Senate's proposed budget for the coming year provides \$3 million from the state's share of the national tobacco settlement to combat the disease. The state is spending about \$2 million on anti Hepatitis C efforts this year.

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NEIGHBORHOOD PHARMACISTS TO OFFER FLU SHOTS WITH COUGH DROPS

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, MAY 23, 2000....Next winter, instead of stopping by your neighborhood drugstore to pick up some flu medicine, you might be able to get a flu shot instead.

State public health officials are developing a pilot program allowing state-licensed pharmacists at a dozen drugstores across the state to administer flu shots and other immunizations. The move is primarily in response to a new federal recommendation that all people 50 and over should get an annual flu shot. It was presented at the monthly Public Health Council meeting this morning.

Officials last year distributed about 650,000 free shots at neighborhood clinics, but say they only reached about two-thirds of the population needing them. Flu and pneumonia are the 4th leading causes of death in Massachusetts, killing about 2,700 people annually combined.

"This is in response to a need to reach as many people as possible, and prepare for the next flu pandemic," said Sally Cheney, deputy director of the state Bureau of Communicable Disease Control at the Department of Public Health. "We really need to strengthen our system, to both increase our reach and to increase our capacity to respond in the future. We believe that adding pharmacists to the list of people who are able to immunize will increase our reach."

Pharmacists participating in the pilot would have to get federally approved training and would be monitored by DPH officials. DPH hopes to distribute 750,000 free flu shots this coming winter. DPH officials say more than 30 other states already allow pharmacists to give shots, which currently can only be administered in Massachusetts by clinicians like doctors and nurses.

The participating pharmacies are in 14 selected cities including Fall River, Pittsfield, Springfield, Nantucket, Lowell and Chelsea.

Other DPH officials are drafting new rules requiring cigarette companies to test how much nicotine gets into smokers' bodies. "It's the first step in a process that could lead to future product regulation," said state Tobacco Control program director Dr. Greg Connolly. "What we do today could influence what Congress does in the next years."

Connolly has previously authored regulations requiring tobacco companies to disclose what ingredients they add to cigarettes. Tobacco companies, arguing such disclosures would reveal trade secrets, have tied those regulations up in court for the past 18 months. But they last month turned over the results of voluntary tests revealing the smoke constituents of 26 cigarette brands. Connolly and state consultants are still analyzing that data, which was derived through tests using machines.

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